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Coming Attractions: Betsy Steinberg Takes Control at the Illinois Film Office

In early January, the local production industry learned that Brenda Sexton, managing director of the Illinois Film Office, was leaving her post to pursue other opportunities in Los Angeles. At the same time, the state named Betsy Steinberg, VP/Development at Chicago's Towers Productions, as the new head of the Illinois Film Office. SCREEN visited with Steinberg during her second official day to gauge what the industry can expect from its new state liaison.

SCREEN: What are your top priorities as managing director of the Illinois Film Office?

My number one, top priority is to bring more film, television and commercial production work into the state of Illinois. We have somebody here in the office, Megan Vidis, who's in charge of commercial production. She's already doing a terrific job – commercial numbers are way up and I'm going to let Megan continue to run with that.

In terms of TV and film, I think it's a matter of getting the word out about three main areas. One is our tax incentive, which [was] expanded in May. Two is to make sure that directors everywhere are aware of the unbelievable diversity of locations across the state. I don't want people to be thinking Chicago is the only type of location we have in Illinois. Third, I want to make sure that everybody in the film industry knows about the top-notch professional people we have here.

Specifically, what types of services can the film office offer to filmmakers, either local or out-of-state?

We have a locations department here within the office [available to] any producer, director [or] writer who's got even the earliest ideas of locations they'll be looking for. We can pick them up and show them everything we've got across the state. It's a huge service. I know there are some states where you go online and look at a few photographs. We're actually here to drive you around [and] let you walk around locations.

Because I come from a film background, I'm very familiar with what people need on set, [and] in every phase of pre-production, through shooting and wrapping. I feel like I'll be extremely responsive to any kind of need a production has while it's here. I want to make

sure that people who come in to shoot, pre-produce and maybe even post-produce, have the smoothest, most enjoyable experience possible.

How do you plan to implement and promote the tax credit to really make the most out of it?

I think my job [is] to communicate to producers the idea of the tax credit and the broad-stroke gains that any given production company can see from it. We also have a few people here in the office [who] are assigned to the nitty-gritty details of the tax issues.

We've [also] recently instituted a very fast turnaround in terms of getting productions their tax money back in time for them to go spend it in post-production. That's been something that Joyce Davis here in the office has worked very hard on.

Illinois has several films on the way after a dry year in 2006. Do you think the feature film business is inherently cyclical and that there will always be peaks and valleys?

I think that we went through a dry year and it was a year of transition [because] our new tax credit hadn't been quite up and running yet. I can't really speak to the cyclical nature of the business as a whole, but I feel like we're going to have a positive year this year and that there was a lot of momentum started in '06 that's going to carry us big through '07.

In terms of funding, what type of resources can filmmakers turn to in Illinois?

I'm interested in forming relationships with any and all businesses in Illinois that want to get involved in the investment end of things, and sharing relationships with people in Chicago or the greater area and introducing them to anybody that could be of help, whether they're in Illinois, California [or] New York.

Production is now an international game. What can the Illinois Film Office do to reach all over the world and promote the state?

I think that, depending on where we're talking about, there can be great advantages, especially for U.K. directors. The dollar, unfortunately, is really weak [and] they can get a great deal coming over here to shoot. I think it's just having a presence at enough conferences and enough international events to let people know. It's a lot about communication.